

The woman who can't stop daydreaming

By Jake Evans

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As a teen, Natalie Switala used the daydreams to retreat into herself, blocking out a traumatic time. (ABC News: Jake Evans)

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We all get lost in our daydreams sometimes, but Natalie really gets lost in them. She is a young woman living in Canberra with an airy voice and heavy eyes. She is told by friends she reminds them of the absent-minded Luna Lovegood from the Harry Potter novels. And when she was 13, Natalie started having strange daydreams. "At the time I loved Good Charlotte," she said. "So I would listen to their albums on repeat and have these really intense daydreams — rather than doing anything else, or communicating with other people."



Natalie would spend hours in her room laughing along with her dreams or mouthing the words. (ABC News: Jake Evans)

It was how Natalie survived her childhood. "My parents divorced and my household was pretty abusive afterwards," she said. "I was sexually abused and I had a pretty traumatic time. I definitely just retreated into my head and I'd spend a lot of time in my room."

It got out of control.

Whenever her parents fought, Natalie would hide in her room in a kind of psychosis, laughing along with her dreams, or mouthing the words, for hours at a time. She had dreams of fame, dreams of friends, dreams of fashion. She knew the dreams were not real, but Natalie was completely immersed.

"You might have a thought, but you'd still be able to bring yourself back. Once I start daydreaming I can't do that," she said.

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- [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14
- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467

Maladaptive daydreaming disorder



Maladaptive daydreaming disorder was identified 15 years ago by psychologist Professor Elis Somer. (ABC News: Jake Evans)

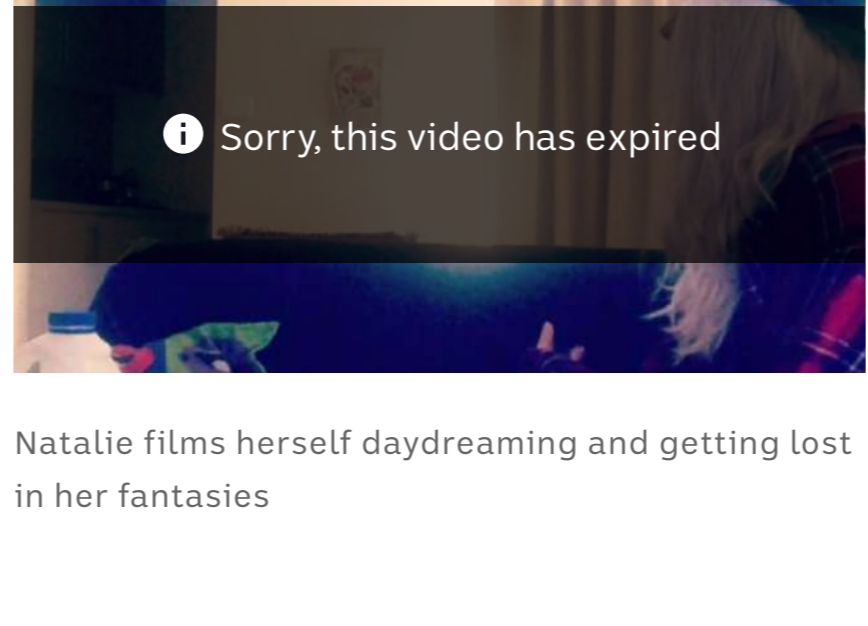
A few years ago Natalie was diagnosed with maladaptive daydreaming disorder, a recently identified strain of dissociative disorder. Though it is not yet officially recognised by the medical community, maladaptive daydreaming was identified 15 years ago by psychologist Professor Eli Somer. Professor Somer is the former head of the European Society for Trauma and Dissociation, and he describes maladaptive daydreaming as a behavioural addiction.

"We're talking about a capacity to daydream so vividly, a capacity for example that I don't have, that people feel totally immersed," Professor Somer said. "And unlike other mental disorders such as schizophrenia — where people have visions, apparitions, hallucinations — in the case of maladaptive daydreaming, people are in complete control over the scenarios."

Natalie describes it as letting her brain "off its leash" or "going blank".

"Daydreaming of course is a very normal and prevalent activity," Professor Somer said.

"But when daydreaming becomes compulsive, when it occupies many hours a day, when that creates distress because they are not in control, and when that interferes with their job or with their social life, then we're talking about a problem."



Natalie films herself daydreaming and getting lost in her fantasies



Natalie describes daydreaming as a way of letting her brain go blank. (ABC News: Jake Evans)

Daydreaming is a compulsive behaviour for Natalie. And it makes it hard for her to work, keep friends and sometimes even eat and shower. "I don't have enough control over it ... it happens a lot, all the time," she said. She describes it like an addiction. "It's like taking drugs, and I'm my own dealer and I'm always going to give myself a little hit of it," she said.

Like make-believe for adults

Natalie was still a child when she first realised her daydreams had spiralled out of control. Her mum had walked into her room one day and seen her daydreaming. "It looks like I'm make-believing as an adult, or as a teenager, and that's only really acceptable for little kids. And she was like 'Who are you talking to in your room?'," Natalie said.

But even after she began seeing a therapist, Natalie hid her condition. She was ashamed, and for a time self-destructive. And as she tried to quit dreaming all together, Natalie would replace it with other harmful habits.



In her art and poetry Natalie refers to her addiction to daydreaming as Dream Dope. (ABC News: Jake Evans)

She has had years of intensive therapy, but Natalie says she mostly finds ways to treat it herself, as even professionals do not seem to understand. To cope, Natalie has started writing and creatively channelling her dreams. Next year, she will begin an experimental program with Professor Somer, "like a 12-step program". She is still dreaming all the time. She says it is still out of control. But Natalie has conquered her shame and she wants to bring attention to a condition that is little known, and poorly understood.

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